TAGORE AND SCIENCE: A CRITICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Tagore is one of the most important figures that has dominated the Indian imagination for almost the whole century. The first Nobel laureate of Asia was not only a writer, but a philosopher, educationist and a precursor of scientific temper in India. He was the man who had the guts of criticizing Gandhi for being unscientific. Tagore’s convictions flowed from his training in western liberal traditions like Enlightenment and Transcendentalism. He was impressed by Darwin, but like Darwin he was not a precursor of an atheistic philosophy of life, rather he believed deeply in God. The current paper is a study of Tagore and his beliefs.

KEYWORDS: Tagore, Transcendentalism, scientific temper, goodness, philosophy.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper discusses Rabindranath Tagore’s affiliations to Western intellectual movements like European Enlightenment, Orientalism and American Transcendentalism reflected in the pre-independence era in two disparate Indian movements namely, swadesi and Brahmo samaj. Though the Enlightenment emphasis on reason and science finds support in him, Tagore does not relinquish the solace or sanctuary offered by faith in God. Similarly, Tagore is unconfined by Swadesi or Brahmo Samaj and shows the critical acumen to stay free from absolute subscription to anyone line of thought. Tagore’s scientific temper was evident in his criticism of Gandhi. It was Tagore only who could criticize Gandhi for terming earthquake in Bihar as a retribution of God for the mistreatment of Dalits. Tagore criticised Gandhi for his unscientific remarks. The courage Tagore showed was extraordinary considering he was criticizing the Mahatma, the larger than life figure in India. But Tagore’s courage emanated from his conviction in the scientific advancement and he wanted all his countrymen to imbibe scientific temper in their lives.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was living in times which were crucial to India as the nation known as India was taking birth at that time. Tagore not only contributed to this formation through his writings which won him the first Nobel Prize in Asia, but also laid a solid foundation for the scientific temper by spreading the western scientific ideas. He was a writer, social reformer, educationist, thinker and revolutionary rolled into one. In fact, he participated in an agitation against the Sedition Bill of 1898 and read an article ‘kantha- rodh’ in protest against the arrest of Bal Gangadhar Tilak whose clarion-call was ‘swaraj’ or self-rule (Radice:1995.17-39).
He also spearheaded the agitation against partition of Bengal in 1905 which was seen as a ploy of the British to create and aggravate the religious divide between the Bengalis of Hindu and Muslim communities. But gradually he drifted to a more inclusive position, especially when the movement tended to become violent. This was also natural since Tagore would have always sensed an opposite pull in the Brahmo Samaj founded in 1828 by Raja Rammohan Roy that leaned towards Western education and emulation of Western thinking. Tagore was born in 1861 in a prominent Bengali family. His father Debendranath Tagore was the doyen of Brahmo Samaj, a reform movement inspired by Enlightenment and belief in reason. The British Crown had taken over the government of India in 1858 following the mutiny of 1857 and the native intellectuals were keen on building a constructive relationship with the foreign imperialist now. This alienated the Brahmo Samaj from the more orthodox Hindu society that clung rigidly to its many crushing and dehumanizing traditions. However, after the Jallianwala massacre Tagore returned the knighthood bestowed to him by the British government in 1915. He was identified as the conscience-keeper of India and hailed as the ‘Great Sentinel’ by Mahatama Gandhi as also lovingly called ‘Gurudeb’ or spiritual master by the general public. It is said that in 1914, after he won the Nobel Prize, Tagore visited the St Stephen’s College at Delhi and spoke on 'Nationality and Western Development of Social Existence'. In his exposition he may have suggested a solution to the problem of the unity of India. In 1920 Tagore visited England and America. In 1921 Visva-Bharati, his university at Shantiniketan was inaugurated.

Tagore was interested in concepts of logic, law, science and mystery as they underwent redefinition in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Though the Western philosophers were influenced by Charles Darwin and prone to doubting the idea of God altogether, Tagore was not at all dismissive of the idea. He exposes the limits of such thinking in the essay ‘The Realization in Love’: ‘Curiously enough, there are men who lose the feeling of mystery, which is at the root of all our delights, when they discover the uniformity of law among the diversity of nature. As if gravitation I not more of a mystery than the fall of an apple, as if the evolution from one scale of being to the other is not something which is even more shy of explanation than a succession of creation. The trouble is that we very often stop at such a law as if it were the final end of our search, and then we find that it does not even begin to emancipate our spirit. It only gives satisfaction to our intellect, and as it does not appeal to our whole being it only deadens in us the sense of infinite’(TO IV. 2005.136).

Showing the shortcomings of shallow reasoning and extreme allegiance to the vogue of reason and complete reliance on mathematics and scientific data in “The Problem of Evil” Tagore remarks: ‘As it is, man does not really believe in evil, just as he cannot believe that violin strings have been purposely made to create the exquisite torture of discordant notes, though by the aid of statistics it can be mathematically proved that the probability of discord is far greater than that of harmony, and for one who can play the violin there are thousands who cannot. The potentiality of perfection outweighs actual contradictions’ (Tagore Omnibus IV.2005.107).

At the same time, Tagore reinforces the positive potential of science by relating it to progress. In “The Problem of Evil” he points out to an antithesis: ‘To go through the history of the development of science is to go through the maze of mistakes it made current at different times. Yet no one really believes that science is the one perfect mode of disseminating mistakes. The progressive ascertainment of truth is the important thing to remember in the history of science,
not its innumerable mistakes. Error, by its nature, cannot be stationary; it cannot remain with truth; like a tramp, it must quit its lodging as soon as it fails to pay its score to the full’(Tagore Omnibus IV.2005.104).

He re-locates the Western idea of science by looking at it through the framework provided by the Upanishadic idea of knowledge and pseudo-knowledge. Tagore embarks on a discussion of value of words, and nature of truth and appearance. As discussed in Tagore’s essays in Sadhana, for Tagore ‘words’ are Maya or appearance. They may be misleading as appearances are deceptive. One should look for the spirit or the idea behind the words and that is truth. The words together contribute to this comprehensive idea but it can be perceived only if one goes beyond appearances. Tagore was an erudite scholar and well-versed in Upanishads. Here is an excerpt from “The Problem of Self” to illustrate the point: ‘Everything has this dualism of maya and satyam, appearance and truth. Words are maya when they are merely sounds and finite, they are satyam where they are ideas and infinite. Our self is maya where it is merely individual and finite, where it considers its separateness as absolute; it is satyam where it recognizes its essence in the universal and infinite, in the supreme self, in parmatman’(Tagore Omnibus IV. 2005.129).

The error of regarding avidya as ‘knowledge’ is common and Tagore warns against it. Avidya is not to be mistaken for Knowledge. In Sadhana, Tagore conveys the meaning through this example discussed in “The Problem of Self”: ‘Imagine some savage who, in his ignorance, thinks that it is the paper of the banknote that has the magic, by virtue of which the possessor of it gets all he wants. He piles up the papers, hides them, handles them in all sorts of absurd ways, and then at last, wearied by his efforts, comes to the sad conclusion that they are absolutely worthless; only fit to be thrown into the fire. But the wise man knows that the banknote is all maya, and until it is given up to the bank it is futile. It is only avidya, our ignorance, that makes us believe that the separateness of our self like the paper of the banknote is precious in itself, and by acting on this belief our self is rendered valueless. It is only when the avidya is removed that this very self comes to us with a wealth which is priceless’ (Tagore Omnibus IV.2005.125).

The nineteenth century American Transcendentalism was an off-shoot of the eighteenth century interest in the East. It was influenced by Kant but also by the thought and philosophies of the East, predominantly Indian. Orientalism also indirectly inspired the American transcendentalism associated with people like Emerson and Thoreau. It is a great example of mutual appreciation that lead Thoreau to influence nationalist leaders of India like Gandhi and Emerson to influence Tagore while these Western counterparts praised highly Indian epics and treatises like Bhagvad Geeta and Upanisads.

In Gora, Paresh Babu is found reading Emerson by his daughters who reads it to them Emerson was a well-known American transcendentalist and a popular author in the nineteenth century. This is to be juxtaposed with the grand plan of Abhinash to present Gora with ‘a fine edition of Max Muller’s book on the Rig Veda, bound in the most expensive morocco cover’- a Western commentary on Hindu religious text (2002). Tagore spoke on the Western reception of India: ‘For western scholars the great religious scriptures of India seem to possess merely a retrospective and archaeological interest; but to us they are of living importance, and we cannot help thinking that they lose their significance when exhibited in labeled cases-mummified specimens of human thought and aspiration, preserved for all time in the wrappings of erudition’
(Tagore Omnibus IV.2005. 73-74). Here seems to be a deliberate contrast between the Transcendentalist and the Orientalist approaches to India; Emerson appeals to Paresh Babu and Max Muller on Rig Veda to Abhinash showing the difference in the breadth of vision not only of the author but of the readers as well.

Tagore like Emerson, his American counterpart, affirmed the goodness of man in his own way. Like Emerson, Tagore maintained a dichotomy between individuality and selfishness in his essay published as part of Sadhana called “The Problem of Self”: ‘We are absolutely bankrupt if we are deprived of this specialty, this individuality, which is the only thing we can call our own; and which, if lost, is also a loss to the whole world’(TO IV.2005.117). For Tagore exercise of individual will is essential for attainment of Nirvana or freedom from worldly bonds. As expressed in “The Problem of Self: ‘The Gita says action we must have, for only in action do we manifest our nature. But this manifestation is not perfect so long as our action is not free. In fact; our nature is obscured by work done by the compulsion of want or fear. The mother reveals herself in the service of her children, so our true freedom is not the freedom from action but freedom in action, which can only be attained in the work of love’ (TO IV.2005.123).

He remembers to speak of love in an essay called “The Realization in Love” featuring within the essay anthology Sadhana. The term ‘love’ in this verse poem is not profane. It is the love for humanity but it is even greater- it is a manifestation of Brahma. Tagore asserts: ‘In love all the contradictions of existence merge themselves and are lost. Only in love are unity and duality not at variance. Love must be one and two at the same time’(TO IV.2005.148).Drawing an analogy with the artist’s love for his creation, Tagore asserts in “The Problem of Self”: ‘The artist who has a joy in the fullness of his artistic idea objectifies it and thus gains it more fully by holding it afar. It is joy which detaches ourselves from us, and then gives it form in creations of love in order to make it more perfectly our own. Hence there must be this separation, not a separation of repulsion but a separation of love. Repulsion has only the one element, the element of severance. But love has two, the element of severance, which is only an appearance, and the element of union which is the ultimate truth. Just as when the father tosses his child up from his arms it has the appearance of rejection but its truth is quite the reverse ‘(Tagore Omnibus IV.2005.124).

To understand how the idea of enlightenment blended with swadesi and Brahmo and then escalated to a transcendental realm one may draw on Gitanjali. The Bengali Gitanjali, an anthology of religious verses waspublished in 1910. In 1912 Tagore visited England where WB Yeats praised the English translation of those lyrics. Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 for Gitanjali which was then published by Mc Milan and when speaking of Tagore where better to start a discussion on Tagore’s idea of freedom and liberty than from ‘where the mind is without fear’.Tagore’s verse is to be read in the framework of the colonial ignominy that evoked the National pride and the consequent Swadesi movement and National struggle for freedom. Here is an excerpt from the aforementioned anthology:

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way

Into the dreary desert sand of habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening
Thought and action-

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

Possibly, the prayer is rendered to Brahma as the Father in these verses may refer to Brahma, the creator in the Hindu scriptures. The poem indicates the moral and intellectual impoverishment that had seeped into the Indian society during the colonial rule. It is an effect of subjugation of the natives by a foreign race. This state of mind materializes as a ‘dreary desert of dead habit’. The alliterative phrase evokes an image of a vast arid desert where wanderers are prone to losing their way. The ‘desert’ here, however, is emphatically not a landscape but a mindset and the metaphor refers to unquestioning submission to habit and tradition. It highlights the irrationality of following the conventions blindly.

The ‘clear stream of reason’ offers a contrast to the dreary desert through which it goes and which can engulf it, if habit is allowed to supercede inquisitiveness natural in man. ‘Reason’ is implicitly compared to a stream. The metaphor of ‘stream’ that connotes movement, progress and fecundity highlights the possibility of life in a ‘dead’ zone. The epithet ‘dead’ for habit seems to be a transferred epithet. This is because it deadens the senses of those it afflicts. People who are trapped in routine are callous and insensitive- almost dead. It is the vivacity in the people that dies and not the habit.

Tagore had moved beyond swadesi and even Brahmo samaj that had its flaws. One was afflicted by superstitions and the other was affected by extreme and absolute belief in reason. He refused to be circumscribed by the ‘narrow domestic walls’ and his continual endeavour was to piece together the ‘broken fragments’ somehow so that the lost global appeal of his country and its philosophy could be revived. The relevance of Indian philosophy in Tagore’s contemporary context needed to be explored. He was in quest of that part of ancient thought that had not been vitiated by mercenaries or hijacked by fanatics. He was eager to salvage that which could be saved, but he agreed that certain traditions needed to be buried for the nation to be rejuvenated.

REFERENCES


